

Freeway planners meet Thursday

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While a draft environmental impact statement on the South Mountain Loop 202 is stuck in negotiations with the Gila River Indian Community over cultural issues, the Arizona Department of Transportation continues to move forward in discussing construction issues.

Thursday, the Citizens Advisory Team meets with ADOT and engineering specialists to discuss issues relating to hazardous materials and utilities along the proposed route.

The meeting begins at 6 p.m. at South Mountain Community College, 7050 S. 24th St., in the Student Union Hall.

Hazardous materials carried on the freeway have concerned some local residents, but freeway planners will also have to deal with 19 hazardous materials sites, including two listed as priority sites, when the freeway is constructed. According to a technical report, all the hazardous sites are on the west side of the project, mostly near 55th Avenue and Interstate 10 near a fuel storage facility.

Construction of the 10-lane freeway will also mean major relocation or accommodations for utilities, including two 90-inch sewer lines on the west side, a 48-inch water line under Pecos Road, high-voltage power lines, railroad tracks in the west, an a high pressure petroleum pipeline and Southwest gas line in Ahwatukee Foothills along Pecos Road.

The South Mountain Loop 202 has been on the maps since 1985, but never built because of budget woes. In 2003, ADOT decided to revisit the original plan to take into account growth and development along the originally proposed router, from I-10 at Pecos Road in Ahwatukee Foothills west, through South Mountain Park and then north to reconnect with I-10 near 55th Avenue.

Over the years the estimated cost of the project has almost doubled, from \$1 billion to \$1.7 billion, and the number of homes estimated to be demolished in Ahwatukee Foothills has grown from 255 to 317.

Many people hope the freeway will be built south of Pecos Road on Native American land, but several times the Gila River Indian Community Tribal Council has passed resolutions opposing the freeway on their land.

Last year, the council passed a resolution recognizing all of South Mountain as a sacred place and traditional cultural property that they say must be kept undisturbed. But current plans call for cutting through several ridges in South Msountain Park.

The tribal resolution, passed in April 2007, declares South Mountain as a sacred place and strongly opposes any alteration to South Mountain, which has held up tentative approval of the draft environmental impact statement by the Federal Highway Administration.